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DE RUEHKA #0618/01 1690726
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 180726Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9042
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000618

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BNP,S ZIA REHASHES OLD COMPLAINTS AGAINST AWAMI
LEAGUE GOVERNMENT DURING MEETING WITH A/S BLAKE

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Begum Khaleda Zia told SCA A/S Blake on June 13 that the Awami League (AL) government continued to prevent the BNP from playing a constructive role in parliament. Zia, leader of the opposition, blamed the Caretaker Government for "destroying the country,s institutions," reiterating her view that the 2008 election had not been free and fair and that the Election Commission (EC) had not played a neutral role. The Assistant Secretary urged her to put aside her differences and work together with the government for the greater national interest. During the hour long meeting, the two also discussed bilateral relations with India, trade and counter-terrorism initiatives.

Cooperation is key...but how?

2. (SBU) Begum Zia welcomed the Assistant Secretary to Bangladesh, by stating that her party had always wanted to maintain good relations with the U.S. The Assistant Secretary affirmed that the USG intended to preserve those links, adding that the two countries had long since been cooperating on several areas of mutual interest - notably democracy, development and anti-terrorism issues - and that the cooperation might now expand to other areas such as climate change, food security and clean energy.

3. (C) Blake noted the tremendous economic potential of Bangladesh, stressing the "great" possibilities if the two major political parties could work together. Claiming her party wanted to work with the government, Zia alleged the problem was coming from "the other side." By way of example, she said the last election had not been fair and the role of the EC had not been neutral. She also blamed the Caretaker Government for destroying and introducing corruption into the country,s institutions, calling it an "illegal government." Zia claimed the party had evidence proving the election had been rigged. She alleged that the new government had not lived up to its promises and was instead engaged in "extortion and land grabbing" and "harassing the opposition." She assessed the AL,s popularity as very low. Moreover, she claimed that if truly free and fair elections had been held the Awami League would have lost. The Assistant Secretary urged both sides to focus on the problems of the country going forward rather than revisiting the past.

Litany of complaints

4. (C) Begum Zia and BNP General Secretary Khondaker Delwar

Hossain affirmed the party,s desire to fully participate in the parliament but said the AL was doing its best to put obstacles in the BNP,s way. Hossain claimed the outgoing BNP appointed speaker had allocated the BNP 10 seats in the front row but that the new speaker had reneged on this promise. Zia pronounced a litany of complaints against the new government, including alleging harassment against members of the BNP - through legal cases against its leaders and attempts to evict her from her home on the military cantonment. She reported that the law and order situation had become very bad. Furthermore, she said the new government did not want an opposition but rather a "non-functional parliament." The Ambassador responded by noting that if that were the case, the BNP was making it easier for the AL Government by remaining out of parliament. Zia replied that the BNP would do everything possible to take part in the government but if that failed, it would take its grievances to the people. The Assistant Secretary suggested the BNP would be best served by offering a positive vision of the future to the voters.

Relations with India

15. (C) Delwar Hossain reviewed several outstanding issues that needed to be resolved with India, including maritime boundaries water sharing, in and the construction of the Tipaimukh dam. He predicted the dam would severely diminish Bangladesh,s water resources and speed up the process of desertification in the eastern part of the country. Party Foreign Affairs Adviser Shamsher Chowdhury cited trade as another issue noting India had placed a number of non-tariff

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barriers on Bangladeshi products that exacerbated a severe trade imbalance. The Assistant Secretary pointed out that local businessmen were positive about the prospects for cooperation with India and that Indians too wanted good relations with Bangladesh. He added that India had long been concerned with the prospect of illegal immigration. Hossain noted that this issue was being used as a political weapon by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other members of the right-wing in India.

Trade and counter-terrorism

16. (C) Zia and Hossain expressed support for the passage of the Trade Relief Assistance for Developing Economies Bill currently pending in Congress. Both noted that this would be a tremendous boon to the garments industry, a majority of whose workers were women. Assistant Secretary Blake replied the bill faced significant hurdles given the U.S. economic situation. The Ambassador added that, even without duty free access in the U.S., the market share for Bangladeshi garments had been increasing. The Ambassador noted he had encouraged industrialists to start diversifying into other export oriented sectors like plastics and light manufacturing.

17. (C) Lastly, Begum Zia stressed that her party was committed to fighting religious extremism and "cleaning society of terrorism." During her time as Prime Minister, she said she had promoted interfaith dialogue. Blake thanked her for her work and mentioned that fighting terrorism also required eliminating corruption and human rights abuses, which were often the basis for radicalization. Zia agreed and said that more would have to be done to fight poverty in order to tackle the root causes of extremism.

Comment

18. (C) Once again Zia and the BNP reverted to well-worn arguments about the legitimacy of the 2008 election (totally false, from our observation of the elections) and the

grievances perpetrated against them by the new government. The valid points (many of which have at least a kernel of truth behind them) tend to get obscured by the falsehoods and extreme hyperbole. Despite the Assistant Secretary,s and the Ambassador,s repeated exhortations to focus on making positive changes to the country the party appeared unable to lift its gaze above the perennial petty squabbles with the AL. On occasion, Begum Zia has shown that she can rise above partisanship; meetings like this however, demonstrate that there is still a lot of work to be done to bridge the gulf between her and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

MORIARTY